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CHILDERS, DAVID CHRISTIAN. American Dusk. (1977)
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It is my hope that the poems in this collection provide the reader
with a sense of place; that is, America; and a sense of hope.

AMERICAN DUSK

by

David Christian Childers

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
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APPROVAL PAGE

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AMERICAN DUSK

On a street in America
as in Rome, a woman
whose husband is in Germany
leaves home.

The butcher folds his bloody towel
and sings.

The banker thinks of sail boats
on white water.

Goodnight says the plumber's daughter.
I love you says the sky.

Shirtless men under cold front clouds
watch an orange star
rise.

BEGINNING AT TOM'S

All the money goes for drink.

The young fool and the older
see each other as themselves and turn
to crack the cold with cups
of what.

The door
flaps down the row
of caps to the endless
street. The Minot
express rolls in.

Ronnie
the madman who went to Wisconsin
comes home in a silver casket
in the snow that covers
the world where the young
girls grow.

The stories and lies

Return.

Wanda married a Marine.

Debbie ran off with a dance
band from Ohio.

Up the highway
cross the county

cross the country
out in Kansas

Sunflower stares
will sweep the Summer hills.

We wait
for our sausage
and retractions.

THE LIGHTNING DANCE

After the war
when the men came home
to the want of what to do
my mother my father
spoke and came together.
They danced across the land.
Lightning glistened in the distance.
They danced beyond the outskirts
where the skulls of captured heroes
stared homeward over water.
They danced and thunder came with rain
over their dance through doorways
to the lights of top room windows
like the eyes of lookout watchers
finding sleep against the tempest
and at last the heat within
the room, the feet and the flesh
wound in blankets, two hands touching
curly heads that dreamed
no farther.

TIMESTUFF

I think of a lake
shallowing up
and the land that's left
behind. Metal plated
birds drop down,
eat what's found.
Then men eat the birds.

This after another letter
predicting the end of things,
the hordes from the mind,
the ever present lines
in the street exploding.

In the poor small countries
we can see the blossom begin.
There are skeletons in the haze.
They are the future
they say. They say
a lot.

I have no money
but I'm not bitter.
My neighbor should be bitter.
His son's lost in Hawaii.

His wife gets compensation.
Soldiers line up in the yard
leaving boot marks down the hall
and their pissing's killed his bushes,
his imported English bushes. He drives off
about supper and comes back late. That's how
he deals with the situation.

I go between walls in the dark eyed lots,
past the steamed school windows from which I bolted
animal dumb toward Summer and now
I run, I breathe. In the smoke
are the souls
that can't leave
or choose to stay.
With napkins and stolen
food and silver
they carry their minds
in brown paper bundles
under their arms no longer
arms but clouds on the horizon.

Down the street
darkness settles.
I think of the men in rattling contraptions
conquering Europe
marching through Asia

gathering the mail on a rainy Monday
propping their boots on the courthouse tables
puking in the back of Archibald's tavern
walking with their sons hunting deer for the pleasure

Of the kill.

They remember strange countries
on fire

strange women

strange children

who might knock at the door.

For me, it's hot beer in a ford

mixed with cherry bombs

under the seat against the springs

alive and ready to coil in coil out

through flashes and rushes of air

through the moving picture

window heads hung back

like ghords in the block

of sky backspinning

fire and the radio

Full blast

through the yards

of farmers

their kids

with blue ribbon heifers

with cold milk and dew
on their skin before church

Now my wife is teaching the children of these buddies
who raised hell in milltown movie theaters
hair swept back like eagles gliding footless
over the rows of Saturday stalled out

Somehow different
these kids
the stances
they strike
in the street
in the packs
their mouths
that got no words

But who you do and what town you were born in
oblivious of Japan oblivious of France oblivious
of giant Russian soldiers flashing submachineguns
in the farness to the north in May
Mongolian eyes molded from 3000 years of flesh

Listen to the molehat

Skyfish

Heynow

Song of the Floridian

Lookahere

2 lizards came down
 to the water the water
 was green they looked
 in the water and what
 they seen was a holy
 man ghosting up above
 on the bridge between
 smoke and the silver crabs

1 went up and met
 the holy man son
 driving a cadillac
 God's will done

He rode home on the luminous cottonmouth
 down to the corner where the holy men
 stand in a line see the teeth how
 they shine to make you stop all
 your crying now look through the sun
 for the one true light now give up
 your belly give up your skin give up
 your home for the stone

Analada

Somehow you will gain
 a pipe and a chair
 You will all be older it will
 all be there

So come back here it's time for therapy
to open you up and let us see
the creatures who inhabit your many limbed
mind tree. That's how we tell you
what you ought and are or else

you'll walk around
naked maybe drunk
out of line you might
stick your head in
a barrel of slaw

Each to each and
on on she floats
for me the nun who loved
the walking statue of St.
Francis in the corner

I saw the same love
there as in her eyes
when she watched our
battles sweep the school
yard to the sunhouse

She picked us up and pushed us on
the nun who slept in the weirdness
of shadows in the wan arms of cancer
through which I could not speak but only stare
at that other face she wore

The nun who taught me as my wife
is teaching those children who grow
through this night and its cleansing sleep

Look I am in this fence look I am in this bush look
long enough to see my hand move now it is free
I am in this rock I was a person was a planet
I remember seasons like faces at the glass and other
people look I am in this tree my limbs are almost
bloody colored and my vital organs are the dirt
the water how strange my whole life seems it was never real

THE WHOLE TOWN

The whole town came out to see
the car cut in half by a train.
Fenders, sprockets, wheels and bolts
spread over both ends of the road.

We watched the two halves drag away
to Red Harper's Body Shop.
We followed them through the rain.

The driver had her head smashed off.
At four in the morning her husband
had the engine running again.

4th NIGHT DRUNK

The Steelers were beating piss out of the skins. Laughter
 dissolved into foam. Tom Turner related a vision of mermaids
 bearing him off to a better existence. The money in saving. The
 wife waving goodbye under the ferris wheel sky.

We wept like the children

we've never wanted.

We wept for the beauty

of it all.

WHITE SQUIRREL

Strange and beautiful
the white squirrel
comes out of bamboo
and crosses the bridge.
Into the flow of vines
and dead grass it disappears.

Some take it as an omen:
Death or luck or something
else;

No one knows.

But the plumber Tom Norton
will capture it and take it
to his laboratory garage.
He'll try to understand it.

Then the banker from Westview
will pay him fifty dollars
for the one of a kind

white pelt.

SHOTS

Out of the golden car
we came through the mud, got stuck
in the yard.

Our feet got to look
like elephant feet. On the porch

I knew I had gone
where I would not go back. I knew
I would not go back. I was not
meant for there

Like Dan and Doug
and the woman the dogs
barked at
on the back road,
the cigarette glowing in the low
air
the laughter.

The couch came first
as far as hatred. The records
were thrown that got it going
but the couch with the clothes and the photographs
and plates
and springs like worms
trying to escape

Was the biggest thing there.

I'd be afraid to see it today

with the crib

with the mirror

with the rolling trash and paper

hung from the roof

sucked into the mud

In Belmont.

along your heights and valleys

like of the

drive back.

There are more secrets in the people

of the town in the night

that are forgotten in the day

that enter the bridges

that enter the bridges

I say. But the water under the bridges

is like the town

by knowing.

and these the secrets are not deeply hidden

for normal men.

While I am among humans

I will please over their secrets

When I am in the river

I will smile.

THE TOWNS IN THE NIGHT

The towns in the night
are lit up with ballgames.

The towns in the night
are full of secrets.

Some of them lay across
tables
among paper weights and bottles.

Some of them
drive boats.

There are more secrets in the people
of the towns in the night
that are forgotten in the day
than under the bridges

I say. But the water under the bridges
is into the ocean
by morning.

And there the secrets are too deeply hidden
for normal men.

While I am among humans
I will puzzle over their secrets.
When I am in the river
I will swim.

TEN MILES GONE

Invariables fall everywhere
like parachute flares over Barcelona
where the swimming pool foams
with drunken clerks.

Long way home.
The white mule turns
toward the yellow death
of air. Ahead a man
with a pearl handled pistol
walks in time with the tune
in his pocket.

I am attached to this damned
wheel always turning into streets
where people wait to say what will

Change my life, my whole
point of view.

On the midnight and beyond shift
a cop with caffeine eyes
talks a waitress down to basics.

Take another look.
The face between sheets.
Its wig is coming off.

TUG'S BOYS

Tug's boys

got pistols on their lungs

got hawkbills in their fists

caressing air and yanking tits

got tattooed gods and swollen rectums

got all day and all night

the broken roof and the brother from Reno

naked in the mud

HUNT

We fashion spears
from the forest
for Harrisson's pigs
gone wild. All day
we follow tracks
over creek beds
rocks and stump
juttred hills.
Farther away
from the fences and town
Our water turns
tepid. Our bodies
smell rank. We
smoke and curse and wait
Until the dogs get crazy
in the late glow
looking deeper through
the shade while
the moon comes up
white and early like
an O on our mouth

When the tracks take form
on a high mound of
stones and the spear
strikes unseen bone
as the wild roar
pierces the wood.

We rest with our
tracks behind us.
Trees bend against
the change of sky.
We rest on a poem
in the blood
on the ground.

SENSE

Rain hung

trees twitch

as if a God

were near.

Is.

Bulls grunt.

Head

for higher

ground.

Clean up operations began in this town of 30,000 today
following the explosion of a shoe factory.....

THERE WAS A ROAR

and the sky rained wing-tip shoes:

the odd parade
consumed our streets and lawns
confused our automobiles:

Those brand new shoes
with three tone laces
and bright black heels

Jumped and danced
while the smoke on the sun
pushed out to sea
like a tongue in the dark:

Unbelievable day!
ruled by shoes
that ruled us any way
from waking up
to falling down:

There was a roar
and all that ceased:

Tangoes on the roof
fox trots down the chimney
high heels in the bird nests:
Disaster inspired laughter
and everyone put on boots.

I look back on varied times.

Humidity swarms up

like the guy out back

who looks toward the sky

and lets a long escape line

stretch out the restaurant dining.

I shiver there

he's back on knees,

back, down, back

on the old black earth.

Ah, the stage,

the red mantles on the street of the late.

Whispering magic,

a woman comes up from the bridge.

Death is death

let the end go quick

where it goes.

THE ELEMENTS

I've quit waiting
on the great siren
to blow an end.

I look back on wasted time.

Humanity stands up
like the guy out back
who looks toward the sky
and lets a song escape him;
doves out the restaurant window.

2 minutes later
he's back on knees,
hands, face, back
on the old black earth.

Ah, the stars,
the red necklace on the street of the bars.
Bringing magic,
a woman comes up from the bridge.

Death be fucked!

Let the end go quick
where it goes.

When I see you there
 2 more of us will know.

COMING AROUND

In the strange month of this day

I am held, I am held

I am forgotten

on a green planet.

Everyone is gone.

Houses wait to crumble.

Climbers climb to the sun.

I smell rain, strawberries

and nesting birds.

Beyond trees thick hills

a river flows.

I look for home.

My feet know

how to go.

COMING AROUND

In the strange warmth of this day

I am held,

a man forgotten

on a green planet.

Everyone is gone.

Houses wait to crumble.

Cobwebs climb to the sun.

I smell rain, strawberries

and nesting birds.

Beyond tree thick hills

a river forms.

I head for home.

My feet know

how to go.

FLIGHT

Horses darted by

a smashed house

Lightning

jumped across

the gunpowder sky

We ran home

terrified

and laughing

SPEAKING AGAIN

The rain stops.

People drift out.

Above the street
and the battered trees

A circle of blue
breaks through.

One came standing through
the light that blinks
their like the face of God.

A
vertical rock
a person's eye
poke through clouds

Silver water and snow
through air

Is not
a sign to my hand

gaily
gaily

BART'S PLATEAU

1

Dew falls.

Things rust.

Fences fold and break

as they must.

Tractor becomes a tree.

Cows come steaming through
the light that blinds
itself like the face of God.

2

cardinal pecks

a pumpkin's eye

peeks through clouds

Silver water wind blows
through me

leaves

a wedge in my head

gently

gently

3

Steam slips out of
 the snow humping houses
 through the eyes of an owl
 hanging loose no body
 but the wind ringing notes
 on a bell. It is good
 how I've awakened
 clear eyed and capable
 of loving this world.

COMMENT ON A BOWL

In a bowl

air

then

a frog

then

air

thin

air

then

An herb

in the bowl

in the hands

of a woman

loving her

people thus

the bowl

and a mosquito

and nails

in this bowl

I hold

full of air

then

water

then

fire

BACK HOME

then

ashes

then

air

black

time

down

is copper light

is copper light

the bags are moving like

sacks in my uncle's

shop

BACK HOME

black

trees

drown

in copper light

in copper light

the hogs are moving like

tanks in my uncle's

sleep

the hogs are moving like

tanks in my uncle's

sleep

the hogs are moving like

tanks in my uncle's

sleep

the quiet streets

behind white curtains

all crystal whippers.

the hogs are moving like

THE MIDDLE

700 miles from Idaho
night slips in on the rise
and fall of rivers and regimes.
Between the toes of mountains
a gas station clings.

"It's downhill
from here,"
the cowboy mumbles.
"You can go fast
as you want."

After Tobar Pass I sink toward
haze and the clink of a bottle
shimmers in my ears.

Far below

There is a town. Its backyards
are burning. I will enter

The quiet streets
Behind white curtains
an eyeball whispers.
Who passes?

A rumble and wind. Snow
grows around the moon. How
deeply everything sleeps.

JOURNEY OF THE EYES

**

He shit so hard his eyes fell out.

It left him unimportant,
a bag of flesh without a word
of explanation save the wind
that whistled up him
as they laid him on the lawn.

But the eyes still saw
down great pipes to the river
whose mouth opened into
the ocean and all.

They saw a city glow like God
between two rows of mountains.
Birds flew from the mountains
and saw the eyes below.

*

Inside the belly of the bird
an eye slept
or woke to see
through the beak to the sky
whose complexion was purple
as the bruise on the leg

of a woman or the face of a man
 whose friends have beat senseless
 and left on the doorstep
 to dismay his children.

THIS WORLD'S WORK

1.

My friend, if you could see today
how the sky lowered itself
upon us like a stained sheet,
how we kept going when the words
mushroomed in us, kept going
toward water as if we could
wash out the taste,

You'd have been more selective
in your dying, at least
given us a warning
so we might've brought you flowers

Or laughter in that room.

2.

Bulbous moon!
A baboon
drives a hearse
full of pythons.

Get in!

They are a joke!

Behold,

My naked sisters.

3.

Drunk sailors listened
with tears in their eyes,
grey, hopeless eyes,
as you recited the tale
of the two headed man

Who was monstrous to behold
and though pure in soul
died a monster's way at
the hands of the saint of harbors.

Everyone walked home
in the cool night;
everyone's life new and good.
Now you could leave
or die as you pleased.
This world's work was done.

SONG OF GOOFING

Goofing

in the green afternoon of leaving and return rolled up in one

the face of sun and city perch on rock and bone.

In the jewelry store

teenage ladies and older girls laugh nervous

because I want to put pottery on my head

and silver cups in my ears

Goofing

with the street crew

watching Saturday crawl in on harsh brown liquor and tough cigarettes

by the cool river where the witch watches time

and holds a potion we'd buy if we had the money and sense.

Goofing

while the whistle blows

while the glass doors close.

Women who knew me when I was four

cannot recognize me any more

Goofing

with the pool hall rats and fat cats

who take the time to fram

a game or two.

But Pervy, the druggist, his mind a memory file,

sees the carnival streets of Montevideo

filled with sailors from every nation and every clime
poised bright in time. He says come here, and I go
because I know he knows

Goofing

is nothing obscene,

not some new hip cult, not some jive ass scene;

Goofing is what goes on

even when we can't say what or why it is.

It is

like this:

The turbaned fat woman on the muddled street
looks right through metal to say she will show me
that horror and hell are only a part
of joy and life and that is all.

I believe her. I can take or leave her.

Words don't change her view of what she is,

I am, you are, they is,

now and ever shall be

Goofing.

THE IN AND OUT

I go now to my money work
where I must turn my head
around and turn my ears and eyes
inside and speak with some conviction

Concerning a warehouse with 6600 square feet
Northwest Area, dock & evenings 368-

6

6

78....politely

and always

aware

of time

that gets into figures

parenthesis, adjustments:

I praise the people

for their perseverance

in matters

un

known un

connected

I sing the caffeine blues (Ah!

Lark!)

In front of me
on the sidewalk
my shadow leaps
like a crow and
flaps and loves

a rose.

THE LAST ONE

I answer the phone
and I can hear your daughter's
brats
banging, farting, crying for something;
dogs, or affection,
and time you sit with
like so many used lamps.

Your daughter's gone off
without her bag
in the bread truck?
She's probably in Atlanta?

Lady,
I don't know.
This
is the news
paper.
Who do you want
to speak with,
Mam?

THE OLD WAR

The Official Men

(they had eyeballs like golfballs)

caught me on the stairs

imitating Bela Lugosi.

"I'm joking," I said.

Their golfballs turned black.

They had goofballs in a brief case

and stood there while I took one.

"Get with it," they said. "We don't want
to catch you gagging anymore.

You got plenty to do."

I went back to my desk

and the telephone rang

and I shot up from that goofball

like a wave

on the wine dark sea.

POEM FOR RICHARD

The tattoo is a carnival man
red striped jersey and bald head
stretching into the hair of my chest.
The first night with it I walked shirtless
through the small Italian town. In
THE MANHATTAN CLUB I drew a crowd.
Drunk for three days the war
was a murmur of captains.

In Summer it stains my clothes.
I lie naked smoking cigarettes
all day. Later when it's cool
I stand below the pine
planted by the fence
before my sons were gone.
The silence reassures me
though my wife can't understand.
She talks about rent.

UNDER JOLAKA

Coming home in the flatland cold
under cloud coils like
God and the first
day of light

We pass an abandoned car
with beer cans and
semen on the back seat.

Two country boys check
the hubcaps and gosh
about the dull chrome
and half moon
headlights.

Above the orange field
an airplane

blinking life

glides low

into the glow
of eastward journeys
and sleep that is older
than the oldest cities
beneath the new
brick and wood
and concrete
over steel.

HOME

Boys hang out on summerwindows.

Girls walk down the dusk.

A streetlight sheds its silence

through the main drag.

The new neighbors talk loud

get drunk and mean.

When we came here in midwinter

trees lay back behind thick rivers.

Stars lay clean on cloudlines

that cut the sun in two.

And there were movements

in mornings we never knew.

There were things people had to do.

Torches burn from new towns that surround us

The apples in my yard turn to dust.

The corners of the world begin to rust.

BEFORE MY HEART WENT BAD

When I was a good prospect
I walked on streets of sun
to shoot pool in a haze of mirrors
and men who knew my name.

Girls passed by into darkness.

Sad birds said

HeyHey

The wind

glided through

my skin

HOMECOMING

After the brief kiss
given for months
we walk home through
the wet night

Past the cottonmill looming
above the broken church;
past dead flowers
on cement.

The table is empty.
The stove is turned off.
There is that hardened
softness in your face.

Shadows move through bushes
where gravestones chip.
A drunken neighbor
curses his day.

Let us seal the door
and think through the dark
with our hands.

ON THE NIGHT OF NOVEMBER 6, 1969

I was yelling in the street from love
that I'd kill the next son-of-a-bitch
who said what he was in a way
that meant something other than what

It should.

I didn't even get shoved.

I threw chairs through windows
and hit my head on a pole

until

I was

on my

knees.

I guess that was good enough.

NOCTURNAL

1.

Here is the street.

I am its guest.

There's no tragedy

under the willow,

neither in the houses

alone, nor my hat

except for the head

intruding.

I call on the best

in me.

Lo, such breezes bloom.

Lord, it is a girl!

striding through impossible flowers.

Crocodiles roll

on their backs like dogs:

A dream for sure,

but a good one.

2.

Old History Eye,

blue of the sky

over Austerlitz,

blue of the blues
 that push us through
 fits, the violence
 of Old Father Earth,
 Old Cannibal Daddy,
 has rightly made you
 cool. But there are times
 when I must burn.
 Old History Eye,
 be gone!

3.

What do they think
 behind the door? Has the door
 been questioned before?
 Which muscles pull which
 organs hard against what
 showers of pronouncements?

Hope is hoping.
 Spring will come.
 Across cool water
 nightwinds wait.

There are doors behind that door.

4.

Things budge.
 Lumber on.

Old shoes crawl from
ditches
to search out attics.

A miracle pushes
at a basement window.
New jokes, new heroes
hang around the corners.

CALL TO SHIPMATES

Get up men and wash yourselves

You stink unto broad Heaven

Get up men and clean your parts

There's no chance to break even

Upon the night from door to door

We've knocked and some say serviced

By wenches, pimps, and bully boys

We've had what we deserved

Get up get up the time is short

The dawn slits the horizon

Behold between the clouds and stars

That God is not now dozing

Some say let God go on his way

And let me now go mine

But even now he snores beside you

Slams the window and I chide you

Get up out of that hole boys

Get up out of that dreamless desert

While the world slides into age

Find work, or wisdom, or rage

But get up off your smelly asses

No one waits and nothing's done for you

There's food in prayer and a vision to hold

Us up above this ill spent voyage

COLUMBUS

Seeing what I saw,
the steep sided harbors,
the cool and fruited trees,

I sail again.

The helmsman spews light
on barnacled men

On miles of glass.

Barefoot girls.

Halo of wind.